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SUBJECT: GREECE'S MUSLIM MINORITY IN THRACE: POTENTIAL FACTOR OF COOPERATION BETWEEN GREECE-TURKEY?

REF: A. ATHENS 1292

[¶](#)B. ATHENS 1155

[¶](#)C. 05 ATHENS 3204

[¶](#)D. 05 THESSALONIKI 99

[¶](#)E. THESSALONIKI 64

[¶](#)F. 2005 RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT FOR GREECE

[¶](#)G. 05 THESSALONIKI 24

Classified By: CDA Tom Countryman for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

[¶](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Greece's large Muslim minority in Thrace could be the source of reciprocal CBMs between Greece and Turkey that lessen tension and assist Turkey's EU accession, a strategic GoG objective. Unfortunately, that is not the case at present: Greece views this minority as purely a domestic issue, while it sees Turkey's obligations to its ethnic Greek minority as strictly an EU matter, as FM Bakoyannis made clear to the Ambassador. The picture, as told to us by Greece's only Muslim MP, is further complicated by Turkey's heavyhanded influence among this Muslim minority -- a significant portion of which is not ethnic Turk, but Pomak (Slavic-speaking Muslims) and Roma. The GoT tends to label all Muslims in Thrace as "Turkish." Turkish government concerns, from a recent Turkish MFA non-paper we received, revolve around direct election of muftis, improving minority education and the like (see para 12). While the situation is far from ideal, there are some modest actions the GoG can take to promote goodwill. It could open a second Turkish-language highschool and promote economic development in Thrace, one of Greece's poorest regions. It could show openness to the election of Muslim community leaders who do not also hold judicial powers. Perhaps the most important thing it could do is open a mosque in Athens, something the GoG has promised to do for some time and a specific point that PM Erdogan raised with Secretary Rice during her recent visit to Ankara. END SUMMARY.

Background

[¶](#)2. (SBU) Thrace, the northeastern part of Greece that borders Turkey, is home to an estimated 100,000 to 125,000 indigenous Muslims who are legally recognized as a minority under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty between Greece and Turkey. The minority, most of whom identify themselves as ethnically Turkish, estimates as many as 150,000 members. Included are roughly 30,000 Pomaks, Muslims of Slavic origin who speak a dialect of modern-day Bulgarian. Officials sometimes estimate that Pomaks comprise as much as 40 percent of the

Muslim minority to downplay the community's "Turkish" origin (ref E reports on the nomination of the first-ever Pomak candidate for super-nomarch in the region). Nevertheless, many ethnic Pomaks, including Muslim leaders, identify themselves as members of the Turkish community, not as Pomaks. There are several thousand Roma-speaking Muslims in Thrace, many of whom also identify themselves as "Turks," a more socially desirable label than the derogatory "gypsy." Muslims in Thrace are relatively uneducated and poor by Greek standards. Most are engaged in subsistence tobacco farming, which will lose generous EU subsidies starting in 2009. The minority's chief complaints are inadequate employment, education, and economic development in the region, as well as infringements of their rights to self-determination or to identify themselves as "Turkish."

Why We Care

¶3. (SBU) Apart from our interest in promoting human rights and religious freedom generally, improving the lot of the Muslim minority in Thrace and the Greek minority in Istanbul offers the potential for Greek-Turkish confidence building measures that might not only reduce tension between the two (such as in the Aegean), but might also contribute positively to Ankara's EU accession process.

Greek/Turkish Perceptions

¶4. (C) Unfortunately, Greece and Turkey differ significantly in how they perceive minority issues. The GoG argues that its Muslim minority is a domestic matter, not

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subject to any legal obligations other than the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, while it views treatment of its ethnic brethren in Turkey as governed both by Lausanne and by Turkish commitments in the context of EU accession. In an April 26 meeting with Ambassador, FM Bakoyannis made clear that the re-opening of the Halki Seminary in Istanbul, for example, was solely a matter of Turkey's obligations to the EU, not a bilateral issue. She said emphatically that she could "never put this on the table as a bilateral issue with Turkey." When Ambassador suggested that, as a means to provide PM Erdogan with political cover, the GoG consider separating the legal and religious duties of muftis to allow direct elections of those who would provide only religious services, the FM was dismissive. She said it would be "dangerous" to change this status and that the GoG was "spending millions on our Muslim citizens" for economic development and new educational and health projects.

¶5. (C) The GoG also argues, not without justification, that the two minority situations are not easily comparable: in Istanbul, less than 3,000 mostly elderly Greeks are "fighting for the very existence of their community," while in western Thrace the 100,000-150,000 members of the Muslim minority are in no such danger. GoG officials note that the two sides' populations were not all that different in size when the Lausanne Treaty was concluded.

¶6. (C) One area where there could be potential goodwill is the opening of a mosque in Athens, still the only major European capital without one. While this would mainly benefit the burgeoning South Asian and Arab Muslim populations in Athens, we know that PM Erdogan is interested in the issue because he raised it with Secretary Rice during her recent visit to Ankara. The GoG has committed itself to doing this recently without any quid-pro-quo from the Turks. The Greeks view it as their own internal obligation (and an embarrassment given the criticism of the foot-dragging from the Council of Europe). However, a firm decision on venue, timetable and funding would no doubt improve the atmosphere between the two.

¶7. (C) In a May 10 meeting with DCM, Amb Konstantinos Bitsios, the PM's deputy diplomatic adviser, confirmed the government's decision to build an Athens mosque from national funds. It would not solicit nor accept funding from Saudi Arabia. DCM urged the GoG to get maximum benefit from its decision by finding some small way to involve Turkey, e.g.: accepting a token donation from the GoT for construction; inviting a Turkish cultural figure to serve on a design committee; or even selecting an architect from Turkey. Bitsios was intrigued and said the GoG might consider these ideas.

Turkey's Dynamic in Western Thrace

¶8. (C) Ankara plays a very influential role in Western Thrace, according to MP Ilhan Ahmet, who is from the region and is Greece's only Muslim MP. He tells us that Turkey attempts to label all of the region's Muslims as Turkish, even when a significant part of this minority -- Pomaks and Roma -- are clearly not ethnically Turkish. Some Pomaks and Roma feel compelled to go along with this to maintain Muslim unity and to seek financial rewards from Turkey (ref A reports on the controversy touched off by delivery of Pomak-language books to a Pomak village).

¶9. (C) Indeed, Ahmet (protect) estimates that Turkey's influential Consul General in Komotini, Umit Gurdum, spends between 4-5 million euro annually on "salaries" in Thrace for certain imams and community leaders. Known as a hardliner, Gurdum protested to poloffs in December 2005 of "gross human rights violations" in the region, saying this situation should not be tolerated in a country that has "supposedly" met EU entry criteria. Ahmet is critical of the CG's (and Turkey's) role because he believes it does not focus on the most important issue facing the Muslim minority: lack of economic development.

What Next?

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¶10. (C) While we would all like to see Greece's large Muslim minority in Thrace serve as a bridge to promote greater understanding and cooperation between Greece and Turkey, we're clearly not there yet. The Greeks, seeing that the EU accession process may provide leverage on Turkey's treatment of its ethnic Greek minority, are clearly not interested in horsetrading on re-opening Halki or other issues. They also firmly believe (with justification) that their Muslim minority is in much better shape than the tiny Greek minority in Istanbul, which they tell us frequently is holding on by its fingernails.

¶11. (C) That said, there are things that Greece can do to make PM Erdogan's own minority decisions easier. We should focus on getting the Greeks to make good on something they have committed to: firm plans for opening a mosque in Athens. They could also take some fairly modest steps, easily defended as being in Greece's own interest, such as opening a second Turkish-language school and promoting economic development in Thrace. Although more problematic, we should encourage Athens to consider how it might tolerate the free election of Muslim community leaders in a way that clearly separates their role from the quasi-judicial functions of muftis.

Addendum: Comments on Turkish MFA Non-Paper

¶12. (SBU) Through the UK Embassies in Athens and Washington, we recently received a non-paper attributed to the Turkish MFA that details Ankara's concerns over the Muslim minority in Thrace:

ELECTION OF MUFTIS: The Turks complain that Greek law defining how the GoG appoints muftis violates the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, and cites the ruling of a European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) decision on this issue. The non-paper advocates for the recognition of the two "elected" muftis in Thrace in Komotini and Xanthi), rather than appointment by the state.

-- The two "elected" muftis, who are supported by the Turkish CG, were convicted and fined in 1999 in Greek courts for usurping the functions of the appointed muftis. They took their cases to the ECHR, which ruled in 1999 against Greece, finding the convictions were in violation of Article 9 (freedom of religion) of the European Human Rights Convention. However the ECHR also found that the state's actions were justified "to protect public order" and to "protect from deceit those whose legal relationships could be affected by acts of (non-recognized) muftis." The ruling did not call for Greece to officially recognize the "elected" muftis, nor to change the procedure for appointing the official muftis, but did suggest Greece take measures to bring the community under unified leadership. In any event, the "elected" muftis continue to practice as religious leaders. (GoG officials usually add that muftis in Turkey are state-appointed, not elected.)

-- MP Ahmet, in a May 10 meeting with visiting EUR/SE Deputy Director Hunt, said the GoG would "never" accept elected muftis, who would be "100 percent" controlled by the Turkish government, and that the GoG would not allow muftis to be elected as lon% !S T(%y 2%ta)& g%"f)cial judicial functions&Q B)T3iol, ij a cif2ersation with the DCM th% 3a-e \$a9, 1a)d there should be no leg!d gbqtac,e tc 4he election of "community le!d%r1" U)T(e5T *Udicial powers, but the politic3)f T()s W+5dd be very complex.

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respect the decision of the ECHR. We expect the ECHR to rule in favor of the use of "Turkish," especially since a similar case regarding the Slavo-Macedonian minority was decided in that minority's favor.

ADMINISTRATION OF WAKFS: The non-paper accuses Greece of interference with the administration of charitable religious and social institutions (wakfs) in Thrace.

-- There are, indeed, serious problems with this in Thrace and on the island of Rhodes (where Muslim charitable foundations and land are worth considerably more). The Greek State has imposed excessive property taxes and fines on the wakfs due to their non-compliance with national land registry laws. (Note: Some of these wakfs can trace their origins back centuries, but do not have property documentation, since many records were destroyed in the world wars. End Note.) The GoG responds that the wakf issue is reciprocal, since fines have been imposed on Greek Orthodox minority foundations in Istanbul, and properties there have been confiscated by the GOT. On a good note, according to minority representatives the GoG has not sought to collect any assessments or enforce land registration requirements (ref E).

PROBLEMS IN EDUCATION: The non-paper (and the Muslim

minority) are critical of minority education in Thrace, namely the inadequate number of schools and low quality education.

-- This is an area that is also valid and we have reported on these problems (ref C). Contrary to the non-paper, however, we understand that the decision to reduce the number of Turkish teachers at minority schools was a reciprocal decision based on reductions in the number of Greek teachers in Turkey. (In a 1968 cultural protocol, both states had committed to a specific number of state-funded teachers for minorities.) The non-paper's claim that compulsory primary education is limited to six years for minorities is untrue; there is a national mandatory educational requirement of 9 years for all Greek citizens. Where there are inadequate numbers of seats in minority high schools (following six years of minority education), children can attend mainstream (i.e., Greek language) high schools. Minority members and MP Ahmet have proposed -- and we agree -- that opening an additional minority high school in Komotini would be more than a gesture, and would be warmly welcomed by the Muslim community.

-- On a related note, minority complaints of inadequate employment and inability to secure civil service jobs are partly due to inadequate Greek language ability. To address this problem, we have encouraged the GoG to follow through on promises to introduce Turkish and bilingual classes in mainstream schools, and therefore promote integration and increased acceptance of minority members. For those minority members who choose to attend minority schools, the GoG should improve the standards of the Thessaloniki Pedagogical Academy, which certifies minority school teachers. Many of these future teachers have poor Greek language ability and are therefore inadequate teachers of Greek. This Academy should have instruction for four years, like other University teaching programs, and could include study exchanges to Turkey to address the additional complaint of the teachers' inadequate ability to teach the Turkish language.

ARTICLE 19 OF GREEK CITIZENSHIP LAW: The non-paper says that Greece stripped tens of thousands of minority citizens of their citizenship from 1955 to 1998 to alter the demographic balance in Thrace. While the Turkish MFA recognizes that the 1955 law was repealed, it claims it still is not easy for those affected to reacquire citizenship.

-- The GoG openly admits that it acted in this manner, but has largely rectified the situation. These citizens were affected by Article 19 of the Citizenship Law, primarily when they left Greece between 1955 and 1998. Article 19 was repealed in 1998, and affected persons resident in Greece can apply to reacquire citizenship either through a process of naturalization or revocation of the administrative order that divested them of citizenship. MFA officials have told us they are committed to investigate any valid citizenship claims brought before them. We follow up regularly to

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measure how many have had their citizenship restored, and how rapidly the process moves.

CITIZENS' RIGHTS: The non-paper says that Turkish minority land has diminished dramatically since 1923 and that, until recently, this minority was isolated from the rest of the world and was restricted even from traveling from one village to another.

-- Restrictions that isolated certain Muslim villages, especially those on the Bulgarian border, are no longer in effect. The non-paper admits that these restrictions appear to have been lifted in recent years, but says legislation enforcing such restrictions is still on the books. We are unaware of any minority complaint on this issue, or on the claim that minority land ownership has been dramatically reduced between 1923 and today through nationalization and

various administrative measures.
Countryman